

What National Account Decision Makers Would Tell Salespeople About Building Relationships

By: [James S. Boles](#), Hiram C. Barksdale, Jr., and Julie T. Johnson

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Abstract:

Examines the responses of national account decision makers to open-ended questions asking for their views on what salespeople need to do to build relationships, and categorizes the results. Eight categories of responses were found. These categories address a number of salesperson behaviors and attitudes - some of which have not been empirically examined in the sales literature. Based on the findings of this study, presents managerial and theoretical implications of these results and implications for future research into buyer-seller relationships.

Keywords: buyer-seller relationship | decision making | salesforce

Article:

Introduction

Building long-term relationships between buying and selling firms has become an increasingly important issue. In the quest for competitive advantage, firms are beginning to realize the importance of building relationships with a loyal customer base (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Jackson, 1985). Once, the implicit belief of marketers was that their primary task was getting new customers. Now, many recognize it is also essential to focus on retaining customers since it is much more costly to get new customers than it is to keep existing ones (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Recent studies demonstrate the importance of building customer relationships. From the salesperson's perspective, this can lead to superior long-term performance through better customer retention (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). Developing strong relationships with a major account can improve communications with a buyer, increase profits for the selling firm, and provide a significant "barrier to exit" (Stevenson, 1981). Business relationships where a buyer has invested considerable time, energy and resources will predispose the buyer to stay with a supplier (Jackson, 1985).

Though selling firms and their salespeople gain from developing good customer relationships, their customers also receive important benefits from such arrangements (Frey and Schlosser, 1993; Spekman, 1991). For instance, customers may obtain a steady supply of product, additional services, or preferential treatment (Dyer and Ouchi, 1993). Additional customer benefits obtained from close supplier relationships can include: various forms of discounts, superior service, reduced levels of risk, and better management of the procurement process by providing suppliers with greater insight into their requirements and purchase procedures (Bertrand, 1987; Cunningham and Turnbull, 1982). Thus, close working relationships yield important benefits to customers as well as their suppliers.

Evidence indicates that salespeople play a central role in the evolution of quality business relationships (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Hawes *et al.*, 1989). While few people would argue that close business relationships are not important, little is actually known about how relationships are established between salespeople and buyers. This research seeks to identify the types of salesperson behaviors/attitudes that, from a customers' perspective, lead to long-term business relationships. Specifically, it identifies what national account decision makers say salespeople can do to build strong, stable business relationships with customers that have the potential to develop into long-term relationships.

Role of salespeople in building a relationship

Forging close relationships between firms begins with the initial contact by a salesperson (Levitt, 1983) who serves as a boundary spanner between the selling firm and customer. The increasing focus on building and maintaining relationships with customers suggests that the salesperson's role in creating and nurturing relationships is growing in importance (Ingram *et al.*, 1992). For some customers, the salesperson is virtually synonymous with the firm (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Czepiel, 1990).

The salesperson and the decision maker with whom he/she interacts are central to the buyer-seller relationship. To build a relationship with a customer, a salesperson must identify and practice the types of behaviors that are most effective in building quality relationships. However, previous studies have not thoroughly examined what salespeople can do during the relationship building process to nurture a new customer (e.g. Macintosh *et al.*, 1992).

Previous research has identified only a few salesperson behaviors that can affect buyer-seller relationships. Relationship performance for life insurance salespeople was shown to be a function both of the: buyer's perceptions of their salesperson's expertise and of the quality and intensity of salesperson-customer communication (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). In business-to-business selling, top performing salespeople indicate that relationships with customers result from building trust and obtaining information about the buyer (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992).

Relationship evolution process

Business relationships are composed of sequential phases or stages characterized by the level and intensity of the interaction between firms and the key employees of those firms. These stages are the:

1. pre-relationship stage,
2. early stage,
3. development stage,
4. long-term stage, and
5. final stage (Ford, 1982).

Within the five relationship stages, there are several categories of perceptions that influence future development of the relationship. Ford (1982) indicates that these categories include:

- experience with the other firm,
- uncertainty concerning rewards that will be obtained from a relationship,
- distance between the two parties (social, geographic, cultural, technological, and time-based perceptions of distance), and
- beliefs about the partner's commitment to the relationship.

Previous research on buyer-salesperson relationships suggests that a firm's salespeople are uniquely positioned to address several issues related to relationship development. Through their interaction with a buyer or buying team, salespeople can increase the customer's confidence in the supplier. This helps reduce uncertainty and increase trust (Moorman *et al.*, 1992).

Furthermore, the quality of salesperson-buyer interactions can decrease perceptions of distance between the two firms and help demonstrate the supplying firm's commitment to the customer.

Initially, in the pre-relationship stage, little is known about the potential supplier. During the early stage, a salesperson may be the only link between the two firms and constitute the customer's chief source of information regarding the supplier. Thus, the time-consuming process of building favorable customer perceptions falls primarily on the salesperson during the initial relationship development periods.

An initial testing period is one sign that a relationship is in an early stage of development (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). This step involves developing routine procedures for doing business together and usually precedes investment in any necessary physical plant changes. From the salesperson's perspective, a reduction of social distance between him/herself and the customer is an important step which must take place during the early stages if a relationship is to develop fully. Finally, while initial commitment on the part of the customer and supplier will be low during this stage, actions by the salesperson can help a buyer decide to increase commitment to purchasing from the supplier. Future actions regarding the relationship will be based, in part, on performance assessments of the partner firm and beliefs about that firm's potential in future business transactions.

During the development stage relationship growth will proceed as purchases of products increase and as the buyer and salesperson deal with a variety of issues related to training, development of specific procurement procedures, and increasing the efficiency of the interface between the two firms (Ford, 1982). As the customer gains more knowledge about the selling firm's norms, values, and performance capabilities, uncertainty is diminished (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Perceived distance also is continually reduced as each firm's knowledge of the other increases and personal

relationships develop between individuals within the firms (Moorman *et al.*, 1992). Once again, the salesperson is a key figure in ensuring that these personal and business exchanges occur.

Actions in the buyer-salesperson dyad are very important factors in the development stage. It is during this stage that a customer begins to trust the salesperson and selling firm fully, based on their past performance. Customer commitment increases as the customer perceives the selling firm is committed to the relationship and is capable of acceptable performance. The salesperson demonstrates commitment during this stage by making continued efforts to reduce distance between his/her firm and the members of the buying center and by ensuring exceptional performance. The relationship can also be enhanced by developing a clear understanding of the customer's preferences in trading partners. Other ways of demonstrating commitment include adapting company procedures, such as order processing, to mesh with those of the customer and in organizing inter-firm contacts in a way that suits the customer.

Once a strong relationship has been firmly established, it enters the long-term stage. By this point the two companies have made long-term commitments to the partnership. Experience is based on trust and the establishment of long-term operating norms. Uncertainty is reduced to a minimum. Perceived distance also is reduced between the two partners. This is partially due to the strong personal relationships that are now in place between key players in the two firms. It also is based on the extensive history of quality contacts between the firms.

The final stage involves standardizing between the firms to the point of institutionalization of their relationship. This stage is marked by a strong idea of what is "the right way to do business" and the development of norms that guide the business interaction between the two firms (Ford, 1982, p. 300). During this stage, interaction between the two firms emphasizes doing business in a specified manner.

While much has been written about buyer-seller relationships, previous research has not systematically identified those salesperson behaviors/ attitudes that are most important in building relationships (e.g. Crosby *et al.*, 1990; MacIntosh *et al.*, 1992). Descriptions of various activities involved in different stages of relationship development suggest that salesperson actions that build strong inter-firm relationships are most important during the early stage and development stage of the relationship. (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ford, 1982; Levitt, 1983; Macintosh, *et al.*, 1992). From initial customer contact, through the time when a long-term relationship comes into existence, the salesperson is the critical link in the relationship development process from the selling firm's perspective. As the relationship develops, the salesperson's role, while still important, may be less critical given the increased number of personal communication lines and established business norms that exist between the two firms.

Previous research concerning the phases of business relationships has provided a good general framework describing how these relationships develop (Dwyer *et al.* 1987; Ford, 1982). However, these conceptual frameworks have not specifically addressed the role of salespeople in building these relationships. Furthermore, the few studies that have addressed various components of the salesperson's role as a relationship-builder have called for greater elaboration concerning the identification of specific salesperson behaviors and activities that build relationships (e.g. Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). The current research study

focuses on identifying salesperson behaviors and attitudes that buyers say influence relationship growth and development. The research question put to respondents specifically asked them to describe what a salesperson could do to build relationships.

Methods

Sample

A list of approximately 300 national account decision makers was provided by the national accounts salesforce of a manufacturer of electronic equipment. Customers included in the national accounts classification receive special salesperson attention. Each salesperson typically handled only a single national account. The average length of time the customer had done business with the supplier's salesperson was more than three years. Furthermore, each of these customers spent, on average, over one million dollars with the manufacturer each year.

The sampling frame is unusual because all respondents are large customers. This study focussed on these national account decision makers because of the value these customers represent to the supplier (Boles *et al.*, 1994). Every respondent had participated in at least one complex business relationship analogous to a partnership or strategic alliance. Previous groups studied in sales-related relationship research have been somewhat restricted. For example, studies examined customers of insurance agents (Crosby *et al.*, 1990) or the views of financial services salespeople and agricultural suppliers (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). The current study extends this literature by examining the views of national account decision makers. These decision makers represent firms from many different industries.

The national account decision makers participating in the study were pre-notified and asked to participate in the survey. However, not everyone who was pre-notified made an unqualified commitment to complete the survey, citing the large number of surveys they received as one reason (70 did not return their survey). Once they were prenotified, they were then sent a comprehensive questionnaire designed to elicit their opinions about business relationships. One of the questions asked respondents, "What advice, if any, would you offer to a roomful of sales professionals about building customer relationships?"

This question was used as the basis for the current research for several reasons. First, the scope of previous research into salesperson actions and attitudes that affect relationships with customers has been restrictive. Typically, the constructs of interest have been confined to a few scale items (Crosby *et al.*, 1990) or examined from the salesperson perspective (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). Second, the current study asked these national account decision makers a free elicitation question about what salespeople could do to build relationships. Since the question was open-ended, there were no restrictions on what these respondents could say regarding the subject. This approach was taken because the researchers felt that these salesperson relationship building activities/attitudes had not been adequately explored from the customer's perspective - particularly in business-to-business settings.

Two-hundred-and-thirty completed questionnaires were returned. Of those, 73 decision makers responded to the open-ended question for a 24 percent response rate. A total of 146 responses were given.

Coding process

In seeking to identify a scheme for organizing customer responses, we examined existing taxonomies of salesperson performance as potential coding frameworks. These taxonomies, developed in other contexts, did not identify salesperson behaviors that are useful in building relationships (e.g. Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Ingram *et al.*, 1992; Williams and Seminerio, 1985). For example, the Churchill *et al.* (1985) framework describes several behaviors and other work-related factors that influence performance. However, it does not explicitly examine how salespeople can build relationships with customers. Given the exploratory nature of the current study and the lack of a useful taxonomy of salesperson relationship-building behaviors, the decision was made to create a coding scheme based on expert opinion.

An independent expert was commissioned to create a coding system based on analysis of buyer responses. The expert had worked as a national account sales manager for various firms and been vice-president of sales for a communications firm. This individual was instructed to categorize the written responses into as many groupings as necessary to be inclusive, while, at the same time, striving for parsimony. Eight categories resulted from this process.

Next, two independent judges with extensive personal-selling experience coded the responses into the eight categories developed initially. The two judges agreed on 86 percent of the responses. In instances where the judges disagreed, a third judge was used. This procedure resulted in 145 of 146 responses being coded using the eight categories.

Results and discussion

The eight response categories developed for this study are listed in Table I by total response frequency. Table I also contains the percentage of mentions a category received relative to other categories represented in the coding procedure.

Table I. Categorization frequencies of buyer open-ended comments

Category	Number of responses	Percentage of total responses
1. Long-term perspective	33	23
2. Honesty	31	21
3. Post-sales support	31	21
4. Creative problems solving	13	9
5. Understand customer needs	12	8
6. Know your product/capabilities	10	7
7. Understand your customer's business	9	6
8. Always meet commitments	6	4

The comment category mentioned most often by respondents focusses on the need for a salesperson to take a long-term perspective. This verifies the importance of thinking about the value of a customer over time (Reichheld, 1994). Examples of these comments include “treat the

customer as a partner” and, “be passionate about your relationship with a customer”. Customers indicate that a long-term perspective is critically important in building relationships. Salespeople that take a long-term approach when dealing with national accounts or other potentially important customers (i.e. national/major accounts or smaller firms with strong potential for growth) will be much more effective at forming lasting buyer-seller relationships than individuals who are more concerned with using a short-term, sales-focused approach as opposed to a consultative approach.

A salesperson’s willingness to “take the long-term view”, is consistent with the framework describing commitment as an important category of relationship evaluation. We suggest it is very important in both the early and development stages of a relationship. This period may be fairly lengthy as the customer determines that they can profitably do business with the salesperson and supplier. It requires patience and perseverance on the part of the salesperson to demonstrate their long-run viability as a partner. However, in major equipment sales with long lead-times or lengthy buying cycles, patience is very important.

Two categories, honesty and providing post-sales service, tied as the second most often mentioned response. Each category accounted for 21 percent of all responses. Items categorized as “honesty” include: “be honest and sincere”, and “tell the truth to your customer”. Previous studies have identified ethical behavior (honesty) as a determinant of trust and satisfaction (Lagace *et al.*, 1991; Swan *et al.*, 1985), which are essential in relationships (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Hawes *et al.*, 1989).

Being honest in dealing with customers can help build strong relationships based on positive customer experiences and a reduction in their level of uncertainty. Furthermore, being honest can improve salesperson’s communications with a buyer - allowing him/her to gather important information which could lead to better customer service and a stronger buyer-seller relationship. While honesty is important in all business dealings, we believe it is particularly important in the early stage of a relationship when the customer is still “testing” the supplier and questioning the value of doing business with the salesperson and his/her firm.

“Providing post-sales service” is represented by remarks such as: “follow-through after the sale”, and “responsiveness to customer inquiries”. Williams and Seminerio (1985) identified service after the sale as a critical salesperson behavior in determining customer-rated salesperson performance and customer satisfaction. Our findings suggest that post-sale activities also are linked to relationship development. This echoes Levitt’s (1983) contention that, from the buyer’s standpoint, the sale is the beginning of the relationship, not the end. It also reinforces the concept of purchase experience as an important step in further developing a relationship. Outstanding service after a sale, especially during the early and development stages, is essential if a salesperson hopes to develop a long-term partnership with a customer. Prompt attention to disagreements or problems is necessary for the relationship to develop fully and for its long-term benefits be realized.

Creative problem solving and understanding customer needs received about the same number of customer mentions, and appear somewhat interrelated. The importance of investigating buyer needs may seem obvious. However, 16 percent of the respondents mention this issue as a

requirement in the relationship-building process. This suggests that not all salespeople do a good job of ascertaining client needs. Until a salesperson understands a customer's needs, he/she can do very little problem-solving. Buyer comments concerning the importance of identifying and understanding the customer's needs include: "work on listening to customers," and "be willing to listen". Creative problem solving is reflected in comments such as, "you must be a problem solver," and "market products to solve problems".

Customers expect salespeople to understand their firm's needs and find ways to satisfy them. Careful listening is viewed as an important step in the process of uncovering customer needs (Schuster and Danes, 1986). Without asking questions and listening to the answers it is impossible for a salesperson to understand customers' needs or provide solutions to their problems. Once a customer learns that a salesperson is a valuable resource for new ideas, the relationship is likely to deepen and the buyer will provide more details concerning their business and specific needs.

Greater information exchange begins during the early stage and intensifies in the development stage. This suggests an expanded role for a salesperson. A salesperson seeking to build a relationship may need to audit the customer's facilities and operations to discover customer needs that can be addressed by the supplier's product/service. It becomes the salesperson's job to understand the different parts of the customer's business so that he/she can discover additional ways to be of assistance to the buying firm. This activity is probably most likely to occur during the development stage of a relationship as the salesperson gains the confidence of the customer and is given additional information about the customer's needs and concerns.

Previous research has frequently recognized product knowledge as an important component of salesperson effectiveness (Churchill *et al.*, 1985). Findings from this study suggest that product knowledge also is important in building relationships with a customer. This category is represented by comments such as: "use all of your firm's resources to help your customer" and "have hands-on experience with your product offering".

Understand your customer's business was next in number of mentions. It is best represented by these remarks: "know your customer's business objectives" and "Get to know your customer's business". Understanding a customer's business is important in the early stage to help get the relationship off the ground. It continues to be important in the development stage because the relationship allows a salesperson to gain greater access to information from the customer which allows him/her to find new ways of providing added value to the customer.

One possible reason why knowledge about the product and understanding a customer's business were not mentioned more often is that salespeople without knowledge are identified by buyers early on and are removed from further consideration as potential relationship partners. Inadequate knowledge leads to salesperson failure - both in sales performance and in building relationships (Ingram *et al.*, 1992). Detailed product, industry and customer knowledge is necessary in the early stage but is not a sufficient condition for establishing a strong customer relationship. If a salesperson does not demonstrate adequate levels of knowledge during the first contacts with a potential buyer, he/she will lack credibility. A salesperson with a credibility problem is unlikely to have an opportunity to move past the early stage of a relationship.

The eighth category, titled “meet commitments”, included comments such as: “never make promises you can’t keep”, and “when you make a promise, stand by it”. Meeting commitments may be considered as part of the trust-building process and is essential for a strong relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Swan *et al.*, (1985) suggest that the trust-building process begins with the first meeting where a salesperson may make some type of commitment to the buyer. Buyers later evaluate how well these commitments were met, which either adds to or detracts from the level of trust that exists between the buyer and salesperson. Thus, this category is important in the early stage and remains important throughout the life-time of the relationship.

Implications

Overall, the framework suggested by this study identifies several areas that are important to salespeople trying to build close relationships with customers. The number of comments received indicate that some categories are more important than others. Based on descriptions from the theoretical frameworks in the relationship literature (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ford, 1992) some of these categories appear to be more important during the early stage with others more relevant during the development stage of relationship development. Other salesperson behaviors/attitudes appear equally important throughout the life of the relationship from the early stage through the long-term stage.

Our findings indicate that some constructs traditionally associated with superior sales performance, also are viewed by customers as basic building blocks of relationships. These performance-related categories include: salesperson knowledge (Churchill *et al.*, 1985); understanding customer needs (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992); creatively meeting buyer needs (Williams and Seminerio, 1985) and meeting commitments (Swan *et al.*, 1985). Results from the current study relating to the importance of customer and product knowledge have some overlap with studies which analyze sales managers’ comments regarding the reasons why salespeople fail (Ingram *et al.*, 1992; Johnston *et al.*, 1989). It also has some overlap with studies which examine purchasing agent comments relating to outstanding salespeople (Williams and Seminerio, 1985).

While there was some degree of agreement between the categories identified by this study and those recognized in previous research examining salesperson effectiveness, at least three categories developed in the current study (taking a long-term perspective, meeting commitments, and honesty) do not appear in either Ingram *et al.* (1992) or Williams and Seminerio (1985) studies. The national account decision makers surveyed in the current study often face long time horizons associated with major purchases. For this reason, the issues of keeping a long-term perspective and integrity may be of relatively greater importance in building relationships with these buyers than for buyers representing small accounts.

Results of this study emphasize the importance of communicating - talking to customers more frequently, and in greater depth, to gain a better understanding of what they expect. It is then up to the salesperson and firm to meet and exceed those expectations. From a theory perspective, these findings suggest that factors such as communication ability and some personal traits (i.e. honesty) may be more important in relationship selling than other salesperson attitudes and behaviors (e.g. effort, role clarity and sales aptitude) that have been linked previously to

salesperson performance in smaller sales. Future empirical studies of buyer-seller relationships should include these constructs.

Managerial recommendations

This study offers potentially valuable ideas about building relationships that can be applied in the design of sales training programs. It appears that most, if not all, of the categories identified by customers as important in building relationships can be influenced by training. This underscores the contention that it may not be as important whom you hire as how they are trained (Churchill *et al.*, 1985).

Focussing salesperson attention and training on issues identified by this research can help improve the performance of salespeople - particularly with large accounts. A relationship-based sales approach suggests that salespeople should take a long-term perspective, which focusses on understanding customer needs and how their product/service offering addresses those issues. This is easier said than done. Short-term goals frequently obscure long-term objectives. Sales may take priority over building relationships. However, when one considers the lifetime value of a customer, the benefits of taking a long-term orientation to selling may outweigh the short-term benefits of making a sale that is not right for the customer.

Management and training implications of findings

To build long-term relationships effectively, a firm must:

1. Emphasize the life-time value of a customer. Focus both salesperson training and the reward system to emphasize this life-time approach - not exclusively on making short-term sales.
2. Provide product training sufficient to ensure a minimum level of salesperson knowledge about their product offering. This also applies to knowledge about a firm's capabilities regarding financing, delivery, and customization.
3. Train salespeople in the use of secondary research information. This training can help them gain an understanding of industry-wide issues and their customer's positioning in the market.
4. Provide detailed training in questioning and listening techniques. Appropriate questioning techniques allow a salesperson to gain a clear understanding of buyer needs, desires and concerns - provided that they know how to listen.
5. Emphasize the importance of ethical behavior. Stress that honesty is the best policy and structure your reward system to ensure that short-term sales demands do not undermine long-term relationship building behaviors.
6. Emphasize that salespeople should not promise what they cannot deliver.
7. Emphasize the importance of appropriate follow-up. This should be done in a manner that meets buyer expectations. Meeting expectations can only occur by knowing what the buyer expects (see item four).

An advantage of using these results in developing training programs is the superior performance salespeople can exhibit when they obtain this information through training rather than trial-and-

error experience. Relationship training could be based on scripts obtained from company salespeople skilled at building relationships, as well as from cooperative customers. This training could help salespeople understand how to create long-term, win-win relationships with buyers. Knowing which behaviors/actions customers value can help salespeople maintain a long-term perspective rather than making sales that will harm the relationship in the long run.

Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations. First, our information comes from one sample of buyers of a single supplier of electronic equipment. Though the respondents represent a wide variety of industries, findings may not be generalizable to other buyers involved in major purchases of other types of goods or services. However, given the size of purchases made by these national account customers, our findings should be of interest to many business-to-business suppliers and offer some suggestions about salesperson training. Another limitation involves the small sample size. Though approximately one-third of the customers provided open-ended responses, it is possible that those not responding feel differently about salesperson behaviors that lead to long-term relationships.

The classification of customer comments also is a limitation since the eight categories are not completely mutually exclusive. For example, a statement categorized as “creative problem solving” might be viewed by another individual as best fitting into the “understands customer needs” classification, while comments addressing the issue of “honesty” and those categorized as “keeping commitments” are also possible candidates for coding disagreements. While we believe the current categorizations are useful, they do overlap to some degree. However, we believe that the extent to which this is a problem is minimal given the high degree of inter-rater agreement in assigning responses to categories.

Directions for future research include empirically testing these categories in a services setting rather than among customers buying a manufactured product. The categories also could be examined for buyers making smaller purchases. By using appropriate measures of the constructs identified in the current study as predictors of relationship strength, the relative importance of each factor related to relationship building can be more accurately determined.

Conclusion

Findings from the present study are unique for two reasons. First, the responses are exclusively those of large accounts with whom the selling firm had a relatively long-lived relationship. We can, therefore, be certain that these customers had experience with at least one long-term relationship. Second, the question was framed specifically to determine customer opinions regarding what salespeople can do to form relationships - not about salesperson behaviors that lead to outstanding sales performance (although the two issues are assumed to be related).

Previous work in a business-to-business selling environment has often approached the formation of buyer-seller relationships from the salesperson’s perspective. We present the buyer’s viewpoint of the salesperson’s role. The comments offered by national account decision makers concerning what salespeople should do to establish and enhance long-term relationships with

customers suggest that a wide range of salesperson behaviors and attitudes are important in a customer's decision to enter into a close relationship with a supplier. Combining our findings with those from previous research from the salesperson's perspective, enables researchers to develop models that empirically describe what salespeople can do to build relationships with customers.

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